



Voices & Visions

A publication of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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Revitalization Sweeps the Southeast Conference

By Joyce Hollyday

We're tired in the Southeast Conference. We travel from north Georgia to south Alabama, from the Tennessee mountains to the South Carolina coast, to meet and nurture our connections. But that's not what's got us weary. It's all the standing ovations when we get there. We're on our feet so much these days, we can barely catch our breath.

We have good reason to celebrate. Under the compassionate and committed leadership of Conference Minister **Dr. Timothy C. Downs**, the Southeast Conference is experiencing dramatic revitalization. For the first time in 25 years, a new church start in the Conference has grown into a full-fledged UCC congregation. We've also recently launched several new churches, all tithing congregations, and welcomed an established congregation that has found kindred spirits in the UCC.



Easter 2000 celebration at Open Community UCC.

In June 1996, the 23 charter members of **Community Congregational UCC in Montgomery, Ala.**, were searching for a home. They found a church building with 20 classrooms and a seating capacity of 550. At the entrance were two plaques—one stating that former governor George Wallace had been a member there, and the other that his wife, Lurleen, had been funeralized there. According to **Rev. Bennie Liggins**, "The church was too big, too expensive, and the church home of the man who had stood in the doorway to prevent our children from attending public schools." Despite all that, the vote of the congregation was a resounding "yes."

Four years later, in June 2000, in that very building, Community Congregational Church hosted the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference. We reveled in the church's hospitality as we celebrated this thriving congregation, and we gratefully received a generous \$100,000 gift from **Dr. Bennie Whiten Jr.** on behalf of the Massachusetts Conference for new church starts. Bennie Liggins has become our Associate Conference Minister for New Church Development, offering his considerable gifts for church building all across the Conference.

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"I will pour out my Spirit upon all...

and your young shall see visions

and your old shall dream dreams." -Acts 2:17



"Grace to you, and peace ..."

A Letter from the Conference Minister

Dear Friends,

Due to several conversations in which I'm involved, I have been thinking recently of the ways in which we need one another and fellow travelers in faith. Often congregations in crisis or suffering disaffection will say to me, "The Constitution and by-laws of the United Church of Christ say, 'The autonomy of the local church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action!'" What they will typically overlook is the paragraph before that sentence, which ends, "In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the head of the church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility."

When we speak about the autonomy of the local church in the United Church of Christ, it is not an autonomy out of which the local church may say to the larger church, "We have no need of you." To quote a UCC theologian, Don Freeman, "Autonomy is the responsibility of the church in each setting to determine its participation in God's mission in each time and place." Autonomy then is not the absence of relationship, but instead the freedom to determine the ways in which a congregation participates in relationship.

In a recent conversation involving the President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, John Thomas, and Michael Kinnamon, newly appointed professor at Eden Theological Seminary, we reaffirmed the centrality of Christ's call to Christian unity as part of our identity in the United Church of Christ. The congregations that do not give witness to that God-given unity within their lives often have "roots too shallow and arms too short." That is, they are unaware of their own history and their connections to the greater church. Often they seek to gather only with those who are like-minded, seeking a safe distance from others whose convictions might challenge their own.

As we celebrate what it means to be the United Church of Christ then, let me suggest the following assumptions:

- The church is central to the Gospel; the good news of Jesus Christ gathers a community to witness to the Gospel by what it says, what it does, and what it is.
- Since the earliest days of the church of Jesus Christ, the testimony to God's redemptive activity has been made in the context of great theological diversity.
- The local congregation does not exist for itself, but is a "sent" people, a sign and instrument of God's reign.
- A denomination, in this case the United Church of Christ, is a network of structures that holds local churches in greater relationship with other churches, and invites congregations into deeper relationship with God.
- The ecumenical movement, which is at the very core of the United Church of Christ, is a reformation movement that helps denominations recognize their true calling and purpose within the greater church of Jesus Christ.

All of this said, it is truly a gift to belong to one another, to share a calling and a proclamation; and to know that we are not alone, but that we have one another and the light of God's divine promises.

Peace,
Timothy C. Downs

Meet Kathy Clark

We are very pleased to welcome Kathy Clark to the staff of the Southeast Conference. Kathy is assisting Dick Sales with the TAP (Theology Among the People) Program.

Kathy received her Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in May 1999, and is in care for ordination with the Georgia-South Carolina Association. She also has a Masters Degree in Adult Education from the University of Georgia.



Kathy is chair of the Worship Committee at Central Congregational UCC in Atlanta, where she serves on the Board of Deacons and the Paul Rice Center for Spiritual Practice Task Force. She has been an assistant professor at Palm Beach Atlantic College and an educational consultant for the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta. She is currently the manager of University Apartments at Emory University.

A mother of four grown children, Kathy enjoys writing poetry, painting, and reading. She confesses to being hooked on the TV show "Law and Order" (both current episodes and reruns). We have come to know her as a gracious spirit with many gifts and a marvelous sense of humor, and we give thanks for her presence among us.

FYI

Southeast Conference work camps will be held in the summer of 2001. A work camp in **Micronesia** will be held **June 2-16**, and in **Hawaii, June 16-30**. These are exciting mission opportunities. For more information, contact Will Rabert: 931-277-5424; willmartha@juno.com.

The **2001 Annual Meeting of the United Church of Christ Office Support Staff Network** will be held **April 20-22** in **Syracuse, N.Y.** The meeting, whose theme is "Humor and Spirituality," is open to any support staff person in a UCC setting of the church: local, Association, Conference, or national. The gathering will include workshops, idea sharing, and a keynote address by Shirley Mahood, author of *Making Our Lives Work*. Contact the New York Conference Office (315-446-3073), or e-mail Susan Gibson at kayesue@ix.netcom.com.

Voices & Visions

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Up the road in **Birmingham**, a jazz band enlivens worship at the new **Beloved Community UCC**. According to **Rev. Angie Wright**, during a recent service when members offered testimonies about what the church means to them, many spoke of it as a place where they have found healing and a sense of belonging. One white member recounted being told when he was in grammar school that he could no longer associate with a black friend. "I have spent the rest of my life being scared of people who don't look like me," he said. He reflected on his son and the son of another member playing together during choir practice. "No one will ever tell them that they can't be friends. If that is not the movement of the Almighty God, I don't know what God is." Another member offered, "I promise you that I have felt the spirit of God in this church like I haven't felt since I made my first communion when I was 7 years old."

Over the mountains, in **Crossville, Tenn.**, **Grace UCC** shares leadership among its members and rents space for its church services to keep expenses low. This group of 17, several of whom are retired pastors and missionaries who live at the Uplands retirement center, contribute 96 percent of their offerings—\$28,000 last year—to outreach both locally and globally.

In the Atlanta area, three churches have become new members in the Southeast Conference family. **Rev. Kathi Martin** pastors **GSN (God, Self, and Neighbor) Ministries** in the **Virginia Highlands section of Atlanta**. She says the church ministers to "the left out and the locked out"—people who have been wounded by the church by virtue of skin color and/or sexual orientation, or who have never been to church at all. When presented for membership at the Georgia-South Carolina Association Annual Meeting in Savannah in September, GSN Ministries received a standing ovation. Many of its members, who had made a five-hour van trip from Atlanta, spoke tearfully about what it meant to them to not only feel at home in a church, but to be received joyfully into a denomination.

Following them, **Dr. Lewis Tait Jr.** spoke about **New Life UCC in Stone Mountain, Ga.** This vibrant and growing Afro-centric church, with a very active ministry for children and youth, has been worshipping since February 2000. Generously supported by **Dr. Jeremiah Wright** and **Trinity Congregational UCC in Chicago**, New Life is seeking to understand Christianity in the context, and from the worldview, of African-American culture, according to Lewis Tait. New Life UCC was also unanimously accepted into membership with a standing ovation.

Rev. Kwan-Hae Chi then presented **Open Community UCC**. The church chose to leave a denomination that insisted that women could not offer leadership. Open Community, whose members gather for prayer every morning from 6:00 to 7:00, seeks to find a "balance between faith and health and identity as Koreans," according to Kwan-Hae Chi. He spoke movingly about the persecution his pastor father suffered when he spoke out against the 35-year Japanese occupation of Korea. Fervent *amens* from the members of GSN Ministries as he spoke made clear that resistance to oppression and the claiming of liberation cross cultural and generational lines. When he finished speaking, we were on our feet again.

Our newest church start is in **LaGrange, Ga.** **Julius Jefferson** is the pastor of **Community Congregational** there. During December, clean-up of the church and outreach to the neighborhood took place. The first service was held on January 7. Members of Community Congregational UCC in Montgomery, where Julius has been a member, rented a bus to come and show their support. Two members of the national UCC Evangelism Team from Local Church Ministries also came for the service.

Gary Roberts, the UCC's Minister of Evangelism for Local Church Building, spent a day with several of our new church starts in September, hearing powerful testimonies of what these churches mean in the lives of their members. As Tim Downs was driving him to the airport, he asked Gary Roberts how the day had been for him. He replied, "This is the best day I have spent in the United Church of Christ."

I felt the same way on the day that we formally welcomed our new churches. I expect we'll be leaping to our feet often as we continue to affirm our unity in the body of Christ, and as we express our joy at being part of a denomination that has room for everyone.

A version of this article appeared in the December 2000 issue of the national United Church of Christ newspaper, United Church News.

CONFERENCE CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

- 4 - 10 **UCC WOMEN'S WEEK**
11 **RACE RELATIONS SUNDAY**
8 - 9 **Covenant for Renewal Retreat** (Pilgrim House, Chattanooga, TN)
8 - 10 **Rekindle the Gift Visit** (Plymouth Congregational, Charleston, SC)
19 **PRESIDENT'S DAY** (Conference Office Closed)
22 - 23 **ALA/TN Church & Ministry Committee Meeting** (Pilgrim Congregational, Chattanooga, TN)
25 **CHURCH VOCATIONS SUNDAY**
28 **ASH WEDNESDAY**

MARCH

- 2 **WORLD DAY OF PRAYER**
9 - 11 **Rekindle the Gift Visit** (First Congregational, Talladega, AL)
11 **AMISTAD SUNDAY**
HEALTH & WELFARE SUNDAY
19 **GA/SC Church & Ministry Committee Meeting** (Conference Office, Atlanta, GA))
25 **ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING SPECIAL MISSION OFFERING**
30 - 31 **Board of Directors Meeting** (Pilgrim Congregational, Chattanooga, TN)

"Welcoming the Stranger"

"My faith is the one true way."

"Each person's faith is a path to God; all faiths are valid."

"All good, just, and loving people are really members of my faith."

"Genocide—or crusade—is the only way to rid the world of false religions."

Which of the above statements most nearly corresponds to your own beliefs about faiths other than your own? Can you explain or defend it?

These were the questions posed for 62 women attending the **Alabama-Tennessee Association Women's Retreat in Pleasant Hill, Tenn.**, on October 27, 2000. The one-day event, "Welcoming the Stranger in a Multi-faith World," was sponsored by the Association, planned and coordinated by the Committee for Women in Church and Society, and held in Adshead Hall of the Uplands Retirement Village. Rev. Dr. Diana Reed Jackson, coordinator of the Women's Multi-faith Center of Orlando, Fla., and Janis Knight, director of education at Beth AM Congregation of Conservative Judaism, Longwood, Fla., were our workshop leaders.

Most of the participants expressed support for the proposition that "each person's faith is a path to God," but objected to saying that "all faiths are valid," because of some discriminatory and violent religious attitudes and practices toward women and children. The workshop was conducted as a series of participatory discussions and activities, including song, dance, sculpture, and poetry. It concluded with a candle-lighting and communion service featuring the sharing of bread and water—elements essential to life.

—Alice Beeman, Grace UCC,
Crossville, Tenn.



Blessings on **Rev. Lisa Tait**, who was ordained at New Life UCC in Stone Mountain, Ga., on December 13.

We give thanks for the life of **Rev. Dr. Donald Watson Goodwin**, who died at the age of 81. Ordained in 1959, Rev. Goodwin was pastor of Oak Ridge UCC in Oak Ridge, Tenn., from 1966 until his retirement in 1984.

Congratulations to **Rev. Roger Whitley**, who has been called to serve Garden City Congregational Christian UCC in Garden City, Ala., and to **Rev. Bill Haffey**, who is serving as interim minister at Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Birmingham, Ala.

Rev. Ed Schneider of Community UCC in Pleasant Hill, Tenn., will be retiring in March after many years of faithful and fruitful ministry.

Congratulations to **Rev. Rodney Franklin**, who was elected to co-chair the Pastoral Care Advisory Board at the University of Alabama Birmingham.

Thanks to **Matt Nevels** of Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Chattanooga, who is the new coordinator of youth programming for the Southeast Conference.

We welcome a new TAP (Theology Among the People) group at **Evergreen Congregational UCC** in Thomasville, Ga.

We give thanks for growth and renewal across the Southeast Conference. Please remember these congregations, which are undertaking capital campaigns for renovations and/or expansion of facilities:

- ***Church of the Savior, Knoxville, Tenn.**
- ***Pilgrim Congregational, Chattanooga, Tenn.**
- ***First UCC, Sweetwater, Tenn.**
- ***Pleasant Hill Community Church, Pleasant Hill, Tenn.**
- ***Brookmeade UCC, Nashville, Tenn.**
- ***First Congregational, Atlanta**
- ***Central Congregational, Atlanta**

Please keep these friends in your prayers:

- ***Irving Faust**, who is undergoing treatment for cancer
- ***Rev. Rainelle Kimmel**, who has had bypass surgery
- ***Michael Wimer**, who suffered a heart attack
- ***Inez Fields**, who had double knee replacement surgery

Please let "Voices & Visions" know of your concerns and celebrations. Contact Joyce Hollyday: 800-442-1064; jhollyday@citcom.net.



2001 promises to be a big year for Rekindle the Gift, the Southeast Conference's oral history and renewal program in our African-American congregations founded by the American Missionary Association. Notice our new logo, which will proudly grace our letterhead, brochure, and display.

We are pleased to announce that we have hired **Rev.**

Susan C. Mitchell as part of the Rekindle the Gift staff. Susan graduated from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta in May 1997, with a concentration in Old Testament and Biblical Languages. She has traveled throughout Africa and the Middle East as a participant in the Biblical Studies Club Educational Travel Seminars. She also holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy from the University of Kansas.

Susan is a native of Chicago, Ill., and her home church is Trinity UCC there. She currently serves as Minister of Christian Education at First African Presbyterian Church in Lithonia, Ga., and she is in care at Rush Memorial UCC in Atlanta. She is active in several community organizations, including the Dekalb County Board of the United Way. She founded the *Tamba Issa* (Swahili for "Dance, God is our salvation") dance ministry in 1994. She believes that the most important thing about her is that she is a baptized believer in Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit and called to "equip the saints."



Susan, Associate Conference Minister **Joyce Hollyday**, and **Milton Hurst** (First Congregational UCC, Talladega) will be visiting all 18 of our AMA churches in 2001. They will be collecting oral histories and consulting church archives, offering Bible study and preaching, and listening to the needs of the congregations. Advisory Board member **Helen Washington** (First Congregational UCC, Savannah) has interviewed and videotaped several elderly members of her congregation, who have shared their stories about the AMA, and other Board members are arranging to do the same in their settings.

The generous support we have received from the Board for Homeland Ministries, the Connecticut and Massachusetts Conferences, the Alabama-Tennessee Association, and some of our local churches will carry us through the year. With the assistance of **Angie Wright** (Beloved Community UCC, Birmingham), we hope to raise enough money to take us into the future. We are planning to publish a book and related resources, and we look forward to a grand celebration of Rekindle the Gift at our 2003 Southeast Conference Annual Meeting.

Congratulations to Us!!!

Once again, the Southeast Conference has led all Conferences throughout the United Church of Christ in per capita giving to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering! Thanks to all for your generosity to this very important offering for people in need.

Leaders of Southeast Conference Gather to Plan Program for the Year 2001

The **Program Planning Committee** of the Southeast Conference gathered October 27-28, 2000, in Atlanta with our staff. We reaffirmed our mission statement: "To develop events, communications, and programs that foster the growth of relationships and community between and within churches, Associations, Conferences, and the United Church of Christ in the national setting, for the purpose of advancing the [reign] of God."

The Committee received the report of the **Rekindle the Gift** Advisory Group. We are continuing with our fundraising efforts and are embarking on the next phase of research in our 18 historically African-American congregations founded by the American Missionary Association, under the direction of Joyce Hollyday in collaboration with Susan Mitchell. By the end of 2003, we hope to have a book written about these congregations and the remarkable work of the AMA.

We also received the report from the **TAP (Theology Among the People) Program**, in which we noted that we now have six TAP courses meeting. These courses have provided opportunities for reconciliation and deepened relationship between churches in the same area as members participate in a common class, as well as the prospect of skilled ministry in our small rural churches. They demonstrate the passion the Southeast Conference has for churches of all sizes and their ministries. The TAP Program is moving in a direction of deepening its administrative roots, and strengthening its relationship with local congregations. It is ably led by Dick Sales and Kathy Clark.

The Commission on New Church Starts and Evangelism celebrated its considerable progress over this last year, and noted that we will be establishing a significant endowment for the development of new church starts. We will be making provisions for the training of new church start pastors in 2001.

The Commission on Church and Ministry continues to promote training opportunities for Church and Ministry committee members. They plan a retreat for clergy in specialized ministries in 2001, and will promote a three-day retreat for all clergy in February, which is intended to provide tools for being more effective in local church settings.

The Commission for Justice and Witness looks forward to promoting the concept of Jubilee throughout the year 2001. They will be inviting congregations to do Bible study on the concept of Jubilee, and will schedule a special Jubilee celebration. Further, the Committee looks forward to promoting a partnership between the Southeast Conference and the Cuban Conference of Churches.

The Commission on Stewardship and OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) will continue to promote the Graham Cluster Stewardship Training Workshop in 2001, and will work to actively educate congregations about our OCWM giving. They look forward to bringing missionaries into the Conference to speak about their work overseas and to promoting the Calendar of Prayer.

In summary, a tremendous amount of work is taking place under the effective leadership of the Board of Directors and the staff of the Southeast Conference.

Southeast Feast

Food for the Heart and Soul

By Joyce Hollyday



A decade ago, on Ash Wednesday 1991, U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf bombed the Amariya shelter in Baghdad, killing hundreds of women and children. That same night, a civil defense siren malfunctioned in the neighborhood in which I was living in Washington, D.C. People flooded the local police station with calls, believing we were under attack from Iraq.

I went to bed that night realizing that children in Baghdad were hearing such sirens every night—and for them the terror was real. I stayed awake listening to other sirens—ambulances and police cars rushing to stop a drug crime or to a shooting in my inner-city neighborhood. In the previous month, three teenage friends whom I had known since they were pre-schoolers had been senselessly killed on its deadly streets—two shot, one stabbed. Too many children were dying—in Washington as well as Baghdad.

I decided that year to keep a fast during Lent. I didn't know what else to do to keep from lapsing into despair. The fast brought me a sharpness of vision, a feeling of looking at the world differently—and a deepened sense of the presence of God. When my physical strength gave out, the assurance of God's sustenance took powerful hold. But still I didn't feel hope.

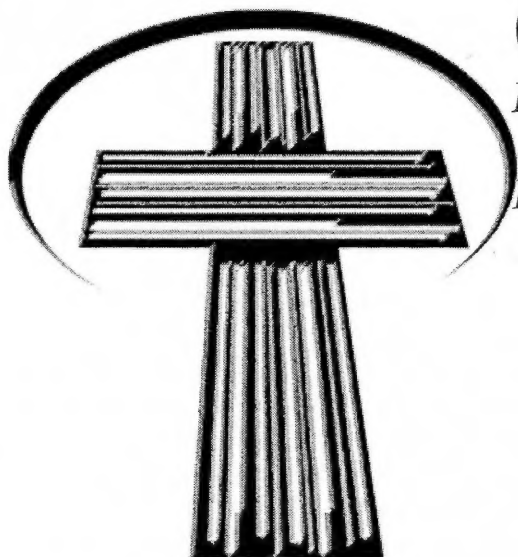
I had to go to the desert to find it. I went to the Nevada Test Site, a patch of land the size of Rhode Island where our nation explodes nuclear weapons, for the 10th anniversary of resistance activities there. After a time of worship, I wandered away from the crowd, to a spot where there was just me, and the gravelly sand, and an occasional Joshua tree with spiny branches outstretched like arms toward God. There, like other pilgrims to the desert have for centuries, I fell to my knees and discovered an emptiness beyond any I had ever known.

For the first time in weeks, I was able to weep, to allow my tears to spill and water the barren earth. And I found, in pouring out the despair, that there was room for hope. There, on the 24th day of my fast, I recalled the words of our gentle God, from Isaiah 43: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

At that moment, I had the thought that perhaps the rivers appear in dry deserts when enough of us have been moved by the earth's pain to weep, to add our ounce of compassion to what may become a mighty torrent of loving hope. May this season of Lent invite us all to deeper compassion as we await the hope of Resurrection.

Youth Fest Coming to Southeast Conference

Youth Fest, a major youth rally organized by Eden Theological Seminary and funded by the Lilly Foundation, will be coming to the Southeast Conference **April 27-29, 2001**. The location has been changed to **Anniston, Ala.** This event is part of a major undertaking to identify young people who are potential leaders within our UCC congregations. Brochures are available in the Conference office, and additional information can be found by going to www.startsomething.org, or calling toll-free 877-627-5654. Circle your calendar, and help start something in the Southeast Conference with our youth!



*Christ is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.*

For in Christ all things

in heaven and earth were created...

In Christ the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

and through Christ God was pleased

to reconcile God's self to all things,

whether on earth or in heaven,

by making peace

through the blood of the cross.

—Colossians 1: 15-16, 19-20

